

Individual-level Characteristics of Childlessness Intentions in Europe

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Extended abstract

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Introduction

Studies on childlessness are of a great importance for understanding low fertility in advanced societies. Current research indicates that our knowledge on the levels, trends and determinants of childlessness remains insufficient. The existing data, which are far from complete and standardized, reveal that among women in European countries lifetime childlessness has been gradually increasing among the cohorts born in the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s (Sobotka 2005, Rowland 1998). Despite this common trend, sizeable regional differences persist; in several regions, especially West Germany and England and Wales, about a quarter of women born after 1970 are likely to remain permanently childless. Even much less is known about the permanent childlessness among men, although it is reasonable to assume that their trends parallel those found among women, probably at somewhat higher level. This evidence is in line with the findings and arguments that emphasise changes in the character of childlessness in the last decades. Whereas in the baby-boom era of the 1950s and 1960s voluntary childlessness among couples was a marginal phenomenon, public attitudes towards childlessness have gradually changed thereafter and the decision to have a child has increasingly become a matter of personal choice and lifestyle. It is important to note, however, that the distinction between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' childlessness frequently remains blurred (McAllister and Clarke 2000).

Recent paper by Hoem, Neyer, and Andersson (2005) points out that our knowledge on the determinants of permanent childlessness remains insufficient. Similarly, it can be argued that the determinants of intentions to remain childless remain relatively little explored. Although fertility intentions frequently change during individuals' reproductive life and, therefore, are unreliable predictors of individual fertility behaviour (Quesnel-Valée and Morgan 2003), they have independent value for understanding fertility decision-making (Berrington 2004).

Main research focus

Our study focuses on the intention to remain childless and on uncertainty related to the decision to have a child among the respondents of Population Policy Acceptance Survey (PPAS), conducted in 14 European countries between 2000 and 2003. Our focus on intended childlessness is justified by the increasing levels of permanent childlessness in most European countries, but also by the fact that a sizeable minority of currently childless respondents in the PPAS survey indicated that they do not intend to have a child or remain uncertain about their childbearing plans. The research on intended childlessness further gains on importance in light of the reported emergence of sub-replacement family size ideals in Germany and Austria

(Goldstein, Lutz, and Testa 2003), two societies that are characterised by comparatively high childlessness levels.

Our main research questions are driven by the existing research on childlessness and fertility intentions as well as by the design of the PPAS survey. The proposed paper also constitutes an extension of our descriptive study on childlessness attitudes and intentions in Europe (manuscript in preparation). Using logistic regression, we explore characteristics of men and women who intend to remain childless as contrasted to those who intend to have a child. In a similar fashion, we look at the characteristics of those who expressed uncertainty as contrasted to those who intend to have a child. This investigation enables us to analyse differences between respondents who intend to remain childless and respondents who are uncertain. We also pay considerable attention to differences between the responses of men and women. Based on the past research, we hypothesise that the actual partnership status is much more important determinant of intentions among men. Since the PPAS survey has collected considerable amount of information on attitudes towards family life and living arrangements, our analysis combines usual socio-economic variables with selected questions on the attitudes towards childlessness and preferences of selected living arrangements. We expect that the intentions to remain childless will be closely linked with more tolerant attitudes towards childlessness and preferences for less-traditional living arrangements.

Data and methods

We study childlessness intentions among men and women in reproductive age, most of whom can still enter parenthood. Therefore we limit our analysis to childless respondents aged 18-39. The overall sample size (between 1.1 and 4.5 thousand respondents per country) together with our focus on childless individuals below age 40 implies that in many countries the number of interviewed men and women who intend to remain childless or are uncertain is so small that it does not allow any meaningful analysis. Consequently, our analysis concentrates on six regions with relatively sufficient number of childless respondents – Belgium (Flanders), Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland. These countries represent relatively well different cultural and institutional settings in Europe.

Our main analysis employs logistic regression, distinguishing three basic models. First we study only the influence of the usual socio-economic factors, such as age, sex, achieved educational level, labour force participation, and current partnership status on intended childlessness. We consider the effect of religiousness, assuming expressed religiousness to be a relatively fixed characteristic of respondent. When available, we include an indicator of respondents' income. Among respondents who have a partner, we also consider information on educational level and labour participation of their partners. The second model contains in addition respondents' attitudes to childlessness and family life, as captured by several questions asked in the survey. Furthermore, we consider respondents' personal preferences on living arrangements. Both childlessness attitudes and living arrangement preferences cannot be interpreted as causal 'determinants' of analysed intentions, since it is likely that attitudes, preferences and intentions related to living arrangements and parenthood evolve in a dynamic and interactive fashion and frequently capture different aspects of broader life-style preferences. Finally, in the third model, we consider only covariates that turned out being most significant for explaining intended childlessness and uncertainty.

The PPAS survey data have some deficiencies, such as cross-country differences in sample size, questions selection and wording, or the choice of possible answers. We deal with these specific issues as we progress throughout the analysis.

Selected preliminary findings

We found considerable cross-country variation in the main factors associated with intended childlessness and childlessness uncertainty. Results for both men and women tend to indicate similar direction, but different strength of association. For instance, in line with our expectations, the effect of current partnership status on intended childlessness or uncertainty is considerably stronger among men: single men are more likely to intend to remain childless than single women. Age and high education are among the factors that repeatedly turned out important for childlessness intentions. Age is positively associated with the intention to remain childless and with childlessness uncertainty; because of biological age limits to childbearing, the effect of age usually appears to be stronger among women. More surprisingly, high education, especially among men, is usually linked to lower level of intended childlessness and uncertainty. Furthermore, we have repeatedly found an association between family attitudes and childlessness intentions. In particular, respondents who disagreed with the statement that they only feel happy and at ease at home with children were more likely not to intend to have a child. Frequently, preferred living arrangements displayed a very strong association with childlessness intentions. Especially of interest are differences between respondents who prefer cohabitation followed by marriage and those who prefer to cohabit without subsequent marriage. The latter group displayed much more frequent intention to remain childless. We plan to provide a more complete overview and discussion of our results at a later stage.